

IDAHO STATESMAN

**Meridian and Mountain View receive grant; \$1.8 million federal grant helps students specialize in interested subjects**

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Mountain View High School and Meridian High School recently got some good news.

The schools, both in the Meridian School District, will share a \$1.8 million federal grant from the Department of Education. The grant money will spread out over the next five years.

The grant is intended to support "smaller learning communities" within schools.

That idea is part of a national trend, said Aaron Maybon, principal at Mountain View — scaling down huge schools into smaller components so that students are less likely to get lost in the crush. Smaller learning communities also let students specialize in the subjects that interest them.

Meridian High Principal Don Nesbitt, like Maybon, advocates smaller community learning. He said such communities are especially helpful for students of average academic ability, who are not problem students and can easily coast, maybe not living up to their academic capabilities, maybe missing out on meaningful in-school experiences.

Nesbitt said students have taken surveys through the years on what they want and expect from their teachers. In the past, he said, students put great value on having teachers who are fair. In newer polls, students want teachers who care about them.

Smaller communities within schools — especially large schools such as Meridian and Mountain View, with student populations of around 1,950 and 2,200, respectively — answer that call.

At first, Maybon said, he thought getting the federal grant was a bit of a long shot. The Department of Education generally gives this kind of grant to well-established schools, he said, and Mountain View just opened in 2003.

Maybon learned that Mountain View would have a better chance at the grant if it partnered with another school. The government, he said, likes to spread the wealth when it comes to education dollars. So Maybon and Nesbitt got together and assembled a grant-writing team from members of their staffs, including counselors, assistant principals and others. The team started working on the application in earnest in May, Maybon said, and spent more than a few nights camped out in front of the computers at Mountain View's library.

The final grant application was immense — close to an inch thick, detailing school demographics, size, academics and more, Maybon said. He gives full credit to the writing team, noting that the Department of Education gave the application top marks.

He said he believes Mountain View and Meridian were such strong contenders for the award because they already have a good track record of establishing small, specialized programs within their student bodies — and without any kind of special funding from the district.

Jim Bradshaw, spokesman for the U.S. Department of Education, said that in this round of competition, 300 school districts applied for grants. Only 57, including Meridian, got awards.

"A panel of expert reviewers evaluated and rated the applications," said Bradshaw. "The level of competition speaks to the fact that the reviewers thought quite highly of Meridian's application."

Mountain View's share of the grant money is around \$925,000.

"Research has shown one-on-one teaching makes the difference with students," said Maybon. So Mountain View's share will pay for more teachers to fill positions in Mountain View's existing "smaller communities," which the school calls "academies." All freshmen at the school are enrolled in "freshman academy," which helps ease students' move into high school, offering help with study skills, setting academic goals and more.

After freshman year at Mountain View, all students choose between entering the following academies: science, engineering and industrial technology; business technology and human services; arts and communication. Within these broad headings, students focus on more specialized topics. Students can transfer out of one academy and into another, Maybon said.

The grant will also help with teacher training, instructional material and substitute staff when needed, to allow classroom teachers to focus at certain times on curriculum development.

Loid Sherwood teaches in the engineering track at Mountain View and said the smaller community concept is key in a school where it would be nearly impossible to get to know individual students without the help of alternative programs.

"I get to know students' learning styles," said Sherwood, "and they get to know my teaching style and what I expect."

T.J. Perkins will be a senior in the engineering program this fall. He favors smaller community learning, though he acknowledges the system can be difficult for students who have not decided what they want to study. For himself, he likes the consistency of his program and his teachers, and the ability to focus on a subject he loves. He's never gotten below a 97 percent in any of Sherwood's classes.

Meridian High will get around \$800,000 over the next five years, but exactly how the money will be spent depends in part on whether voters approve another influx of money — a \$139.8 million bond for the school district.

If the bond passes in September it will include funds for a professional/technical facility on the Meridian High School grounds. The federal money will help train teachers for the new programs as well as help set up specialized academic programs similar to those at Mountain View.

If the bond doesn't pass, Nesbitt said, Meridian High will still use the federal grant money to train teachers and will still go ahead with its plans to create magnet tracks in health science and visual and performing arts as well as expand its professional/technical offerings.

All these projects will just happen on a smaller scale without the bond funds, he said.

In the past three years, both the Nampa School District and the Twin Falls School District won smaller learning community grants.